

# westways

A full-page photograph of a Bryce Canyon landscape. The scene is dominated by red rock hoodoos and spires. A rainbow is visible on the left side of the image. In the foreground, three people are standing on a rocky ledge, looking out over the canyon. The title 'westways' is written in a stylized, outlined font across the top.

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# A WHALE OF A TALE IN BAJA

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GENE WARNEKE

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A huge head boiled out of the water, fixing our 22-foot skiff with a probing eye the size of a football. Everyone on board gasped. Barely a foot away, the whale's gray hide glistened with ashy barnacles, scars, gardens of whale lice, and sparse, bristling hairs. Suddenly the lagoon swallowed up that whole microscopic picture. Under the surface, the great, green 40-foot form passed beneath the boat. Giant bubbles erupted upward, setting the small craft rocking. A minute passed. Then a steamy whoosh of salty, pungent vapor drenched everyone's astonished faces as the whale resurfaced alongside the boat, spouting. It hovered there for an instant and edged forward until its nose gently lifted up underneath one of the passengers' hands.

"A friendly!" the guide said. "And look." A smaller head rose beside it and—almost delicately—nudged the boat. "Here's the baby."

Laguna San Ignacio in central Baja California is a perfect whale sanctuary, stretching some 17 miles inland from the Pacific. Its glittering calm is broken only by dancing plumes of spray, an occasional frenzy of fins

and flukes from mating activity, and whale heads poking up in rapid spy hops before easing back into the deep like peaceful sighs. The water comes alive from December to April every year, when hundreds of whales, mostly mothers and their calves, turn this warm, protected shelter into a nursery.

It's one of Baja's three Pacific lagoons where gray whales migrate yearly to bear and train their young

before the long trip north to Alaska and the Bering Sea, their summer feeding ground. What sets this lagoon apart from the others is not its proximity (about 50 miles) to the oasis town of San Ignacio, with its lava-stone mission and cool clusters of date palms, or its isolation amid desert beaches, where tar-paper fisher-



The barnacle-encrusted front end of a whale breaks the surface in what is called a spy hop (left). The activity in the lagoon can be mind-boggling. Even while enjoying a Baja sunset, guests (above) keep an eye out for action.

men's shacks are the sole signs of human existence. Laguna San Ignacio was the first spot on earth where gray whales swam right up to whale-watching skiffs and let humans stroke them. No one knows exactly why. Mexican fishermen have called them *ballenas amistosas* (friendly whales) since 1976, when the first hands-on encounter is said to have occurred. They are now simply called "friendlies."



It's hard not to be initially nervous when comparing the bulk of a whale to the size of your boat (opposite). But apprehension turns to infatuation (right) as the creatures close to petting distance. Although whales are undeniably the stars of Laguna San Ignacio, there are other things to marvel at, such as a single-file formation of pelicans cruising at wave-top level past the camp tents (below).

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To meet one demands quite a pilgrimage: a trip down to San Ignacio by air or Transpeninsular Highway, then a two-and-a-half-hour ride on a worse-than-washboard road to the lagoon, then a 40-minute boat ride to the desert island where Baja Discovery of San Diego runs its whale camp, smack in the center of friendly territory.

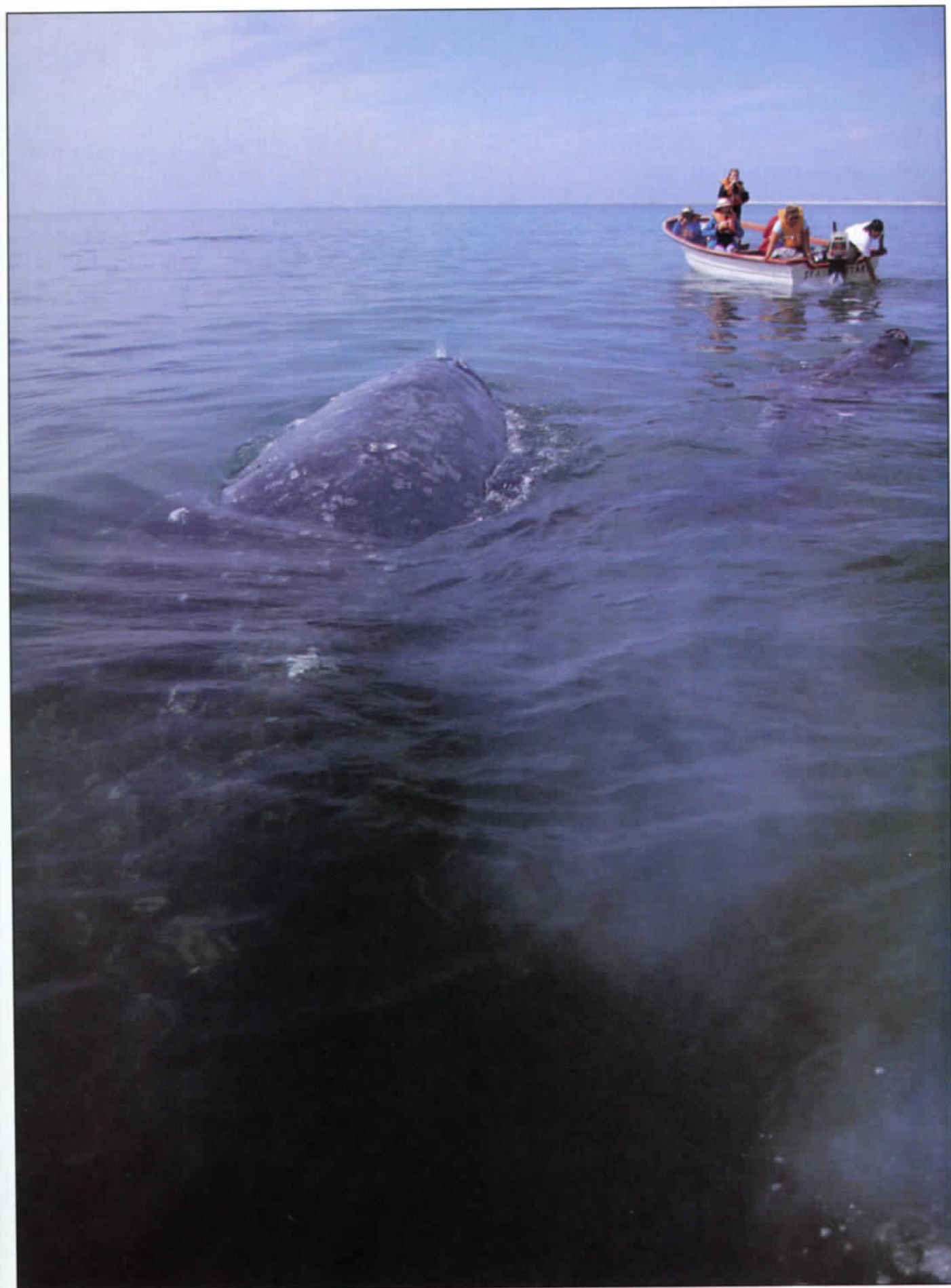
When I arrived there last March, I was unprepared for the intimacy of the experience. Having experienced conventional whale watching several times—getting all worked up over vanishing flukes and misty spouts 100 yards off the bow of a commercial fishing vessel—I was even amazed at the show from the bluff where the camp stood. The spouting, breaching and spy hopping percolated day and night just offshore from the peaceful hamlet of dome tents.

Morning and afternoon trips by boat took us out into the lagoon to search for friendlies. There was no accounting for their moods. On the first trip out, we spotted nothing and went home to supper disappointed. The next day, amid our chorus of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and calls of "Here, whalie, whalie, whalie," whales started steaming in from the far horizon. At first a mother and calf approached our boats. (They couldn't hear our singing, mercifully, though they can pick up low-frequency vibrations in the water.) Fast on their heels (flukes?)



came a procession of others. Soon we had a fiesta of seven whales (one solo, the rest in pairs) rising and sinking around us like islands amid a ballet of fountains.

"Their skin is very sensitive, and they like to be touched, though not around the blowholes," our guide explained invitingly. Leaning out of the skiffs, we took turns caressing their cool whale flesh, variously compared to eggplant, hard-boiled eggs without the shell or inner-tube rubber.









The calm, protected waters of Laguna San Ignacio (opposite) make a perfect sanctuary from the turbulent Pacific. Gray whales make the yearly trip here from the chillier waters off Alaska. Human visitors must make an inland pilgrimage of their own—along a rugged desert road (below)—to reach the lagoon from its namesake town of San Ignacio.



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To have these 40-ton giants literally at our fingertips was mind-blowing. As we became more and more at ease, we began to plant quick, giddy kisses on the whales. They seemed to bask in the affection. It awakened the kind of wonder Arthur C. Clarke expressed in *The Deep Range*: “Why were these graceful sea-beasts so fond of man, to whom they owed so little? It made one feel that the human race was worth something after all, if it could inspire such unselfish devotion.”

The crowning glory came on our last day out, when a calf befriended our boat. Rolling over and over, practically purring, it shoved its head under our hands and faces for strokes and kisses. But nothing could top the moment when it suddenly swam about 20 feet away and began to breach repeatedly, leaping and twisting into the air as we cheered in disbelief. “Calves almost never breach!” said our guide incredulously.

Few other species in the wild present themselves to humans like this. Their trust is all the more remarkable considering that gray whales were hunted nearly to extinction up until the late 1930s.

Mexico was one of the first nations to protect them. It passed its first laws against whale killing in 1938. A sun-bleached sign announcing the law’s 50th anniversary is stapled to a post outside the home of fisherman Pachico Mayoral, whose family has lived on Laguna San Ignacio since the turn of the century and has always maintained a respect for the whales. “One reason for their friendliness,” he suggested, “may be this lagoon’s small community. There have been so few people here to bother the whales.”

Today, the gray whale population is up to about 18,000. The Mexican government issues limited permits for traffic inside Laguna San Ignacio to ensure their privacy.

And the humans who pet them will never again see a whale as just a whale, but as something they touched that touched them back—a friend. 

The best time to visit Laguna San Ignacio is from January to late March every year. To get more information, contact Baja Discovery, P.O. Box 152527, San Diego, CA 92115.

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